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ABSTRACT

Masculine pronouns are commonly used as gender-neutral terms to refer to persons of unspecified sex. To explore how preferences for professors and counselors was affected by the sexist or nonsexist nature of the language that they use, androgynous and sex role stereotyped male and female undergraduate students (N=68) read excerpts from four counseling sessions and four journal articles, half of which were presented in sexist and the other half in nonsexist language. The students ranked in order their preferences for the professors and counselors who were represented by these excerpts. Statistical analyses showed the type of language utilized by the professors had no impact on preferences of the subjects. The language of counselors, however, had an impact on preferences. Overall preference was shown for counselors using sexist language. This preference, however, was based on the choices of male and sex-role stereotyped students. Androgynous and female students did not differentiate among counselors on the basis of sexist or non-sexist language. (Author/WAS)

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The Impact of Gender and Sex Role Orientation on Preferences for Professors and Counselors Utilizing Sexist and Nonsexist Language

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Running head: Sexist-Nonsexist Language

Abstract

This investigation explored how preferences for professors and counselors was affected by the sexist or nonsexist nature of the language that they use. Sixty-eight androgynous and sex role stereotyped males and females read excerpts from four counseling sessions and four journal articles, half of which were presented in sexist and the other half in nonsexist language. Then, they ranked in order their preferences for the professors and counselors who were represented by these excerpts. The type of language utilized by the professors had no impact on preferences of the subjects. The language of counselors, however, had an impact on preferences. Overall preference was shown for counselors using sexist language though this preference was not exhibited by female or androgynous subjects. Possible explanations for these findings, and suggestions for future research on this topic are offered.

The Impact of Gender and Sex Role Orientation on Preferences for Professors and Counselors Utilizing Sexist and Nonsexist Language

In recent years, the use of such terms as "his", "he", and "man" in what has been commonly described as putative gender-neutral terms to refer to persons of unspecified sex, has come under question. It has been the growing contention of many that using such male-only terms as gender-neutral excludes females. Indeed, it is perceived by some as a subtle symptom or manifestation of sexism. In response to this concern, the American Psychological Association (APA) has distributed a publication manual change sheet entitled "Guidelines For Non-Sexist Language in APA Journals" (APA Publication Manual Task Force, 1977). As articulated in the APA policy statement therein contained, "...because the APA as an organization is committed to both science and the fair treatment of individuals and groups, authors of journal articles are expected to avoid writing in a manner that reinforces questionable attitudes and assumptions about people and sex roles" (p. 487). A number of commercial publishers have also changed their copy-editing policies to replace male terms with explicitly neutral terms such as "his or her" or "she or he", or unmarked plural forms such as "their" or "they" (Harper & Row, 1976; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976; Random House, 1975; Scott Foresman, 1974).

The question of the existence of detrimental effects stemming from the use of such male-oriented, sexist language is a hotly contested issue. Some empirical literature suggests support for the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf, 1956), that the way individuals think is in part determined by the linguistic forms that they use. Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978) observed that thoughts of males came

to mind significantly more frequently than thoughts of females when male pronouns were used. This did not occur when gender-neutral pronouns were employed. In somewhat related studies, Kilby and Whited (1975), Dewey (1974), and Nickerson (1979) examined standard and revised ("neutralized") versions of the Self-Directed Search (SDS; Holland, 1970). The neutralization of gender-specific occupational titles and test-taking instructions were associated with significantly different outcomes among female test-takers. Results indicated that the revised, nonsexist interest inventories were preferable in determining both the assessment codes and career aspirations of college women. Boyd (1976) failed to demonstrate any significant effect on either assessment codes or career aspirations, although a significant difference in the perceived sexual equality of the standard and revised SDS forms was observed.

Perceptions of sexist and nonsexist language as well as those who utilize it may be dependent, in part, upon the characteristics of the individuals perceiving it. Bem (1979) has postulated that individuals of different sex roles differ "(a) in the content of their beliefs about what the two sexes are like and (b) in their cognitive schemata for processing gender-related information" (p. 1053). Some empirical evidence to support this contention has been observed. Deaux and Major (1977) observed that sex-role stereotyped subjects differentiated between a male and female significantly more than androgynous subjects did when viewing videotapes of actors performing a neutral activity. Lippa (1977) found that sex role stereotyped subjects both differentiated along the masculinity-femininity dimension significantly more than androgynous subjects and weighted the dimension more heavily in making judgments of handwriting. Additionally, Mezydlo and Betz (1980) found that the ideal woman in our society

was described as possessing significantly more masculine characteristics by feminists rather than by nonfeminists. Finally, Merluzzi and Merluzzi (1981) found that stereotyped subjects tended to make extreme judgments of the credibility of female counselors when the counselors' disclosure level and expertise were manipulated. Androgynous subjects, however, did not perceive any differential credibility as a function of disclosure level or expertise. On the other hand, some studies have failed to find differences on the basis of sex role orientation of subjects but instead have observed differences on the basis of gender. Banikiotes, Kubinski and Pursell (1981) found that male subjects had differential perceptions of the self-disclosure of hypothetical males and females, whereas female subjects did not. Also, Banikiotes, Neimeyer and Lepkowsky (in press) observed that males had a significantly greater difference than females in their descriptions of their ideal same-sex and other-sex friend. It is possible, therefore, that both gender and sex role orientation may have an impact on preferences for the utilization of sexist or nonsexist language.

The impact of sexist or nonsexist language in a variety of professional contexts has yet to be investigated. Two contexts in which psychologists find themselves are in academic and health service situations. As these two situations differ with regard to purpose and level of intimacy, it is not clear whether the reaction to sexist or nonsexist language exhibited by professors would be the same as it would be to such language exhibited by counselors. It is the purpose of this current investigation to explore how preferences for professors and counselors is affected by the sexist or nonsexist nature of the language that they use. Specifically, it was expected that androgynous,

rather than sex role stereotyped, individuals and females, rather than males, would express preference for professors and counselors who use nonsexist rather than sexist language.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 68 undergraduates enrolled in a psychology course at a private midwestern university. They ranged in age from 18 to 21 and volunteered to participate in a study regarding reactions to professors and counselors. They received neither experimental credit nor pay for their participation in the study. These 68 subjects were chosen from a larger group of 95 on the basis of their gender and sex role orientation classification from the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BRSI; Bem, 1974). The sample was composed of 17 subjects in each of the following four categories: androgynous males; androdynous females; sex role stereotyped males; and sex role stereotyped females.

Instrumentation

Sex role orientation was measured by the BSRI. A list of 60 personality characteristics was presented to a subject and he or she rated on a 7-point scale how well each describes himself or herself. Of the 60 characteristics, 20 are masculine, 20 feminine and 20 neutral. Subjects were classified as androgynous or sex role stereotyped on the basis of median split scores on the masculine (M; 4.89) and feminine (F; 4.76) scale utilized by Bem (1977). Subjects scoring above the median on the M and F scales were classified as androgynous. Females who scored above the median on the F scale and below the median on the M scale and males who scored above the median on the M scale and

below the median on the F scale were classified as sex-role stereotyped.

Sexist and nonsexist forms of excerpts from four counseling sessions and four articles were developed. The average length of the counseling excerpts was 300 words, and the average length of the article excerpts was 400 words. The counseling sessions included a range of problems, i.e., underachievement, low feelings of self-worth, procrastination, and family difficulties. The gender of the counselor was unknown, and the client was depicted as a female. The articles included a range of content, i.e., developmental processes, psychopathology, personality, and authoritarianism. The gender of the professor was unknown. The sexist and nonsexist forms differed with regard to their pronoun usage with the sexist form using the masculine pronoun and the nonsexist form using both masculine and feminine pronouns. There were an average of 6.75 such differences per counseling script and 10.50 such differences per excerpt from articles. Other than these differences, the two forms were identical. Twelve counseling graduate students rated the excerpts on an 11-point scale with regard to sexist - nonsexist language. Significant differences beyond the .001 level were observed in the intended direction.

Procedure

Subjects completed the BSRI and then were asked to read the four excerpts from counseling sessions and the four excerpts from articles written by professors. No other information regarding the counselors or professors was presented. Each set of excerpts (both those of professors and those of counselors) was randomly chosen and ordered, and included two sexist and two nonsexist excerpts. No subject received the sexist and nonsexist form of the same excerpt. After reading the four counseling excerpts, subjects ranked in order their preference if they

were to seek counseling from the counselors whose excerpts were represented, and after reading the four journal article excerpts, the subjects ranked in order their preference for taking a course from the professors whose articles were depicted.

Results and Discussion

$\underline{X}^2$ analyses were computed separately for the distribution of preferences for professors and for counselors in the top two and in the bottom two rankings. Overall rankings as well as rankings by gender and sex role orientation were computed. No significant differences were observed with any of the analyses pertaining to the preferences for the professors. From the overall rankings of counselors, a significant preference, $\underline{X}^2 = 5.38$, $\underline{p} < .05$, was found for counselors utilizing sexist language. Significant differences were observed between the preferences of males and females, $\underline{X}^2 = 6.20$, $\underline{p} < .05$. Males preferred counselors utilizing sexist language, whereas females exhibited no such preference. Significant differences were observed between the preferences of androgynous and sex role stereotyped subjects, $\underline{X}^2 = 7.14$, $\underline{p} < .05$. Sex role stereotyped subjects preferred counselors utilizing sexist language, whereas androgynous subjects exhibited no such preference.

The findings of this study offer some support for the original predictions. Subjects preferences for counselors were affected by their gender and sex role orientation. Their preferences for professors, however, was neither affected by their gender or sex role orientation nor the sexist or nonsexist nature of the language that was utilized. It is possible that the influence of type of language may be greater in a more intimate and personal situation such as counseling rather than in a less intimate and impersonal academic context.

Overall, the subjects expressed preference for counselors exhibiting

sexist rather than nonsexist language. This preference, however, was based on the choices of male and sex role stereotyped subjects. Androgynous and female subjects did not differentiate among counselors on the basis of the counselor's sexist or nonsexist language. These differences on the basis of subject characteristics are consistent with Bem's (1979) conceptualization of sex role orientation as related to "cognitive schemata for processing gender-related information," and its supporting research findings (Deaux & Major, 1977; Lippa, 1977; Mezydlo & Betz, 1980; Merluzzi & Merluzzi, 1981). It is also consistent with previous findings demonstrating gender differences in preferences and judgments (Banikiotes, Kubinski & Pursell, 1981; Banikiotes, Neimeyer & Lepkowsky, in press).

Although differences on the basis of gender and sex role orientation were observed, the absolute level of differences in the preferences was somewhat surprising. Rather than finding androgynous individuals and females expressing preferences for those utilizing nonsexist language, it was observed that no preferences on the basis of language utilization occurred. Instead, the subject characteristic differences resulted because the stereotyped individuals and males exhibited preference for those counselors utilizing sexist language. It is possible that the awkwardness of using both the masculine and the feminine pronouns in the nonsexist language conditions leads to negative perceptions. This problem of awkwardness may have been further augmented by the use of the written modality. Further efforts need to examine both the impact of nonsexist and sexist language in other modalities (i.e., oral) as well as means by which nonsexist language can more naturally be utilized.

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